



20 June 2024

#362

FEARCOLLIGI

Lisboa 1713 km

1770 km

Edinbùrghann 758

697 km Milànod

2085 km Athinai/Aθήναι

352 km Strasbour

1062 km Barcelona

605 km München

Londonas 321 km

2907 km Lefkosia/Λευκωσία

917 km Wienne

1852 km Valletta

Tallinn



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“EUROPEAN PROJECTS GIVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING REAL”

Italian scientist Isella Vicini has made community funding for research projects one of her areas of expertise. She is involved in GREENART, a project launched by the European Union in October 2022, which is developing new green and sustainable restoration products to preserve works of art.

With a master’s degree in computer science, this former researcher at the CNR’s Robotics Department (Italian National Research Council) coordinated and managed targeted activities for research projects in the ICT field from 1986 to 1993. She co-authored more than 30 scientific articles published in national and international journals and conference proceedings. As a project manager at Think3 Inc. and head of European project management and administration from 1993 to 2008, she has since been the director of the European Funding Division (EFD) at Warrant Hub, an Italian company offering integrated services to support industrial development projects. In this role, Isella Vicini provides methodological and strategic advice on accessing European funding for research and innovation, as well as preparing, submitting and managing European proposals. Drawing on this experience, she was involved in setting up the GREENART project, which benefits from HORIZON funding, the European Union’s main programme for research and innovation, with €95.5 billion allocated for the period 2021 to 2027.

To develop its innovative methods, GREENART relies on a multidisciplinary partnership bringing together several European universities and research institutions, as well as industrial companies, SMEs, museums and conservation professionals collaborating to develop new green and sustainable restoration products, such as cleaning agents, protective varnishes, consolidants and monitoring technologies. This European consortium is funded by the European HORIZON programme under a Culture, Creativity

and Inclusive Society agreement. The project began on 1st October 2022 and will end on 30 September 2025. In the meantime, the funding arrangements for European projects have evolved. Isella Vicini explains the potential impacts of these changes on GREENART’s development.

Nowadays, how are European research projects funded?

Initially, Europe finances 45% of the total budget in advance to start the project. As it is public money, progress reports must be submitted, but funding is provided for the entire project. The change coming next year, and generally in future calls, is that there will no longer be an obligation to submit economic and financial progress reports. In fact, a small advance will be paid at the start, and the rest will be granted based on the results obtained, objective conditions and achievements made.

How long should projects last?

Projects generally last for three years, or a minimum of 36 months. However, in some sectors, such as

health, they can last up to 60 months due to lengthy experiments and tests on people.

What impact will this change in funding method have on projects?

The problem may arise, for example, when work is organised in work packages, as in the case of GREENART. Payment will only be made when the work package is completed and all related results have been validated. It is only at this point that the entire consortium will be paid. So, will each member organisation of the consortium depend on the results of the others? Exactly. What will also change, and become more difficult for people like me who set up projects, is that we now need to integrate this dimension of achieved results into a budget that, from an economic and financial point of view, meets the expectations of the European Community, but also takes these variables into account.

Could this lead to deadlock situations?

The whole question is where to set the research objectives, because if the TRL is very high, there's a risk of not achieving the results and consequently not being paid. So perhaps we should consider lowering the TRL at that point.

What are the consequences for the work you do?

When setting up this type of project, we obviously look at the economic and financial aspects. But we also need to take into account the concrete actions and research objectives, because being funded in this way means knowing all the details in advance very precisely. The feasibility study must include everything: what activities are planned, the number of days needed to carry them out, the skills, material and human requirements, material costs, and so on. If the package estimate isn't realistic, there's a risk of losing the entire project.

from the university and industrial sectors. And also someone who does the economic and budgetary follow-up. This means that for each project, every 18 months, a team of 5-6 people is mobilised just to monitor its progress. These are very high costs. The idea is to reduce these management expenses. It is true that it is simpler, because there is nothing to demonstrate, no control from the point of view of invoices, for example, which was the case previously with funding under the advance system for the entire project. From now on, everything must be attested precisely, for each stage.

When will the new European programme funding arrangements be implemented?

Implementation will be gradual, but it will become the rule for the next framework programmes starting in 2027 for a seven-year period. Discussions are ongoing.

Cooperation is essential. In an uncertain world affected by climate change, technology can offer the possibility of preventing future problems, and culture allows us to connect and project ourselves into a desirable future. We need to think about the message we want to convey. I believe that European projects, and research in general, give us the opportunity to do something real. — *Isella Vicini*

How do you proceed?

We need to look at the TRL, which stands for "Technology Readiness Level", an assessment method used to estimate the maturity of the results of a particular technology. It includes a whole range of indicators that demonstrate exactly the steps taken and the viability of the project, with numerous testing and validation stages. Of course, activities that have been completed and successful will be paid for.

Why has Europe decided to change its funding methods?

The aim is to reduce costs from an administrative bureaucracy point of view. What does this mean? Behind every funded project, there is a project officer in Brussels who provides technical follow-up, but who does not necessarily know the subject matter or research area. So, for each project, they need three experts paid directly by the European Commission who come

The election of the Commission President has put things on hold [Ursula von der Leyen was reappointed as head of the European Commission on 18 July, Editor's note]. For the moment, we don't yet know what the next lines and budget for next year will be. Normally, the European Community gives them two years in advance. For example, I already knew the details of the 2023 and 2024 calls in 2022. After the elections,

Isella Vicini
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we should know the details of the 2025 and 2026 calls, but for the moment we only have a macro vision of future calls, i.e. the general themes. Further details should be given in September-October.

Which won't leave you much time to prepare the call...

There will not be any calls before the end of 2024. The next ones will start at the beginning of 2025, around March. This means that next year there will certainly be a complementary calendar, as many projects end at the end of 2024.

Do you have any idea of the general themes that will be supported?

There are numerous budgets dedicated to climate change, renewable energy, artificial intelligence for all medical applications, but also in terms of "hard" sciences.

And what about GREENART?

GREENART's budgetary destination falls under the "Culture and heritage" domain in European funding. When we talk about heritage conservation, we are not just talking about sustainable innovation or new environmentally friendly materials, but also about traditions, crafts, cultures, music, intangible heritage, and so on. The overall budget will undoubtedly be significant, even if it will not be comparable to that of the medical sector. It will cover culture and humanities, and therefore everything relating to the conservation of our history and heritage. Today, projects like GREENART are organised in different clusters. It's almost certain that this organisation will not change for the three remaining years of the HORIZON 2021-2027 programme. GREENART also calls on Information Communication Technologies, which can be directed to other clusters or other funding. Ultimately, the GREENART project is highly cross-cutting.





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